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ABSTRACT

Children need to develop skills enabling them to respond to television efficiently, analytically, and with discrimination. Removing children's advertising from television will not help them to understand the nature of the appeals used by the advertiser, who will find other means of reaching children; and advocating no violence on television brings children no closer to understanding human aggression. Education is the way to guard human communication from the liabilities of technological culture. Broadening perspectives about mass culture should help to decrease anxieties about the mass media. The next step is to recognize that technology does not introduce a new problem nearly so much as it aggravates very old ones: this means that the basic problem is one of human interaction, human communication. Instead of worrying about the child's interaction with television, teachers should concentrate on how television affects other forms of human interaction; for the communication revolution has brought people together while estranging them at the same time. The thing to do in this situation is teach fundamentals, developing the critical thinking skills that enable more complex decisions about television viewing and media usage. By teaching the maxims of mass communication, teachers can show their students how to understand the mass media, thereby controlling them. (RL)

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Technological Culture and Human Communication

by John J. Carney, Jnr.

In a 1970 interview, Charles Guggenheim, a political media advisor, 'image-maker,' admitted that he considered some of his colleagues in the people-selling business suspect, because they engaged in 'visual demagoguery.'[1] In 1974 visual demagoguery was the subject of an extensive article in the New York Times, which recalled a 1957 film, Face in the Crowd, about an unsavory American country-western singer, rising via television with the complicity of a small band of corporate and political supporters, to a position of political influence bordering on dictatorship. The Times's article said "this movie about a TV star with political ambitions was thought to be exaggerated in 1957. No one would say that now."[2] Actually, in 1950 an article in one of our news magazines, contemplating the eventual wedding of television and politics commented: "candidates with 'look apppeal' are counting on big things...television offers a chance for a buck-and-wing artist [tap dancer] or a Miss America... [to rise in politics]."[3] Apparently nobody was listening.

I was invited to this conference to make suggestions about what we can do to help children develop receptor skills, which may help them to become efficient, analytical, and discriminating in their responses to television. I have linked these observations because, taken together, they illustrate some very basic realities that must be faced when we talk about communication skills in a technological age. If you will forgive me the presumption, I would suggest these realities form a context within which all recommendations of this conference might be considered.

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So first, the realities - the context, as a way of pointing out some things I don't think we have a prayer of accomplishing as teachers in this technological society, and then some suggestions about things we may be able to do.

Daniel Bell, the sociologist,tells us there are three elements in a mass society: numbers, technology, and the accompanying societal instability or flux. Individuals respond to that insecurity with anxiety. We belong to mass cultures, simple to observe, but difficult to react to objectively. Yet, nothing short of world-wide catastrophe will change the nature of the society you live in, and you can't escape it. The Amish in my country, living as though in the 18th Century, farming with horses, not using electricity, tried to escape it. But someone built a nuclear reactor in their backyard and it nearly blew up. Television in its quieter moments likes to lull us with the bucolic serenity of "The Little House on the Prairie." That's not the way it is anymore.

Most of us, however, are fascinated by our tremendous capacity for technological creation. Psychologists tell us this has to do with our drive for new experience. We have explored our geographical frontiers. We concern ourselves with technological and scientific frontiers.

But there is a trade-off. Technology brings benefits - and liabilities. Yet we insist on developing the technology while often, incomprehensibly, avoiding any exploration of the potential liabilities. I'm talking about <u>all</u> technology, not just television or nuclear energy. I'm sure the first person who lost a hand to gunpowder was as much startled by the sudden insight into the liabilities as he was by the pain, and the reality of the missing hand. Arthur Koestler suggests we prefer to promote our positive species specific attributes: the ability to communicate, store knowledge, create,... we don't enjoy

dwelling on less savory attributes of the human condition, like our apparent inability to use our creations for the positive conduct of human affairs.[4]

We also tend to ignore the related reality that the liabilities of a particular technology come into existence when the technology comes into existence. You have had television in Australia for 22 years. You have had problems associated with televison for 22 years. You didn't worry about those problems 22 years ago. Oh, some did, but not the society as a whole, not even large segments of the society. Unfortunately, when a culture finally awakens to a technological liability, the reaction is often -humanly- frantic, subjective, and sometimes misguided.

Perhaps that is why when we become aware of liabilities related to a specific technology, we tend to direct our responses to that technology rather than to the broader problems of the societal context. Television is a good focus for our frustrations, and we narrow our perspectives in the process.

One of the speakers at your Conference on Television and Children, last September, talking about television, said:

> ...here is an industry which has been permitted to expand over the past 22 years with an absolute minimum of research designed to provide evidence of its effect on society....

He then suggested that such a situation would not be tolerated in any other industry "either by the public or the government."[5]

I am happy for you, but a little suspicious. I have heard many positive things about Australia, but I find it difficult to believe you have marketed no products, created no systems, over the past thirty years which have since proven harmful or questionable, except television. I share the speaker's concerns about television but regret his perspective.

There is one last reality: obvious perhaps, but it should be articulated. In our societies, technologies and numbers have spawned 'corporations,' huge, impersonal systems, not human, whose goals are profits. The socialists have bureaucracies. Some say we are worse off, having both. I pass on the ideological argument. Both distress the individual.

Now in what ways do these realities restrict us as teachers of communication? If we really want to help children survive this society, especially in light of the electronic behemouth, what actions or strategies should be ignored in order to conserve our energies for potentially effective strategies?

If you think elimination is the answer; turn off the tube - save your strength.[6] The corporations won't let you. The elimination of television would have to be prefaced by an absolute reversal of our economic and, therefore, political systems. Even then you would still have the people to deal with. They want television. They think they want it for positive reasons. We are learning they often want it for reasons they don't understand. Early studies on the companionship function of radio, and the extension of those findings to television, show us that. Thanks to unsuccessful attempts to pay groups of people to give up television, we now talk about television addiction.[7] Nothing is truly inexorable, but I don't want to be around when someone tries to pull the plug.

What about regulation? If I read correctly the responses of Australian politicians and educators to the question of regulation of children's programming, you face exactly the same dilemmas we face in the United States.[8] It would be fine to have regulations which would provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of the influence of television on children, but, while we can regulate the nature of programs designed for

children, how do we regulate what children watch? Where do we find the god to articulate this universally satisfactory solution? And finally, if we allow the government to control children's programming, what will they want to control next? We want someone to protect and assist us, but our political upbringing makes us suspicious of regulation.

Kevin Tindall, of course, makes the very valid observation that Americans (and apparently Australians) resist the nature of European government regulation of television, refer to it as "somebody over there...playing god," while ignoring the fact that in the U.S. someone also plays god, but the objective is profit.[9] Unfortunately, exchanging one god - more to the point - exchanging one devil for another, isn't likely to solve problems. You may play with regulation all you want, but I submit, again, if you think regulation is the ultimate answer, your problem is political not educational.

Well then, why can't parents be expected to exercise judgment in relation to the viewing habits of their own children? People in commercial television are in the habit of reminding us of parental responsibility. At the Sydney Conference, David Morgan, Deputy Director of the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, provided a list of guidelines for parents.[10] Will it be followed? You are educators. You know the answer.

For ten years using a questionnaire based on a national survey about television-viewing habits,[11] I have surveyed students to construct 'audience profiles.' One of the questions is: "at any time before entering college were your TV viewing habits subject to parental guidance?" The answer is usually "no." The number subject to parental control has been rising slightly in recent years, but not significantly.[12] Discussions of the controls exerted indicates they are often capricious, exercised arbitrarily, and suggest no discernible value system.

We could educate parents to guide their children's viewing habits. There are organizations in the United States attempting to do that. Ten years from now, the results may show up in my survey-minimally. I hope you will not view my remark as cavalier, but let's be honest; we have developed the educational systems we have in our cultures at least in part to protect our children from their parents.

Of course, some of you may be uncomfortable with my dogmatism. There is a basis for arguing for some regulation. Parents should not be allowed to ignore their responsibilities. There is room for discussion. I agree, discussion but not advocacy. My final 'cannot,' 'should not' has to do with advocacy.

I said earlier that one of the problems of our society is that when we become aware of technological liabilities we often react emotionally. Most of us don't understand a lot about the technology we use. Even the technicans don't understand everything they should about their creations. And it is a human tendency to react to the unknown with suspicion and fear. That's when we are most susceptible to the very kinds of appeals we wish to teach our children to resist in television. We look for gods to exorcise our devils. We find an expert who promises salvation.

I tell my students there are no experts. There are many who claim to be, and some who will turn out to be. This is not an attack on research. It is an acknowledgment of a tendency that we all recognize, even in ourselves - the tendency to attempt to resolve anxiety by accepting what seems to be a satisfactory answer even when we suspect it is not the correct answer or the only answer.

Am I suggesting that Action for Children's Television (A.C.T.) is misguided because they want to ban advertising from children's television in the United States? or that our National Parent Teachers Association

is wrong to oppose violence in programming? Not at all. I wish them well. But removing advertising will not help children to understand the nature of the appeals used by advertisers, who will find other means of reaching them. And advocating no violence on television brings us no closer to understanding human aggression. But more importantly, accepting one theory or the results of one study only narrows our perspectives, limits our curiosity, and deadens our imagination. As educators we can't let that happen.

So what do we do? We do what we are trained to do. We educate: the children, the teachers of the children, and we educate ourselves.

The first two steps are attitudinal. We have been dwelling on the first. Recognize and teach the context in which you and your students function. That context involves not simply acknowledging the pervasiveness of television in our society, but recognizing the nature of the society itself. It means acknowledging the anxiety that is a natural, though uncomfortable, attribute of that society. Senator John Button last year said, "Australian society is in my view in a state of chronic anxiety at the moment about the future of this country."[13] Momentary chronic anxiety sounds like a contradiction, but I think the Senator was perhaps more perceptive than he realized. The anxiety is chronic, not just in Australia, but the source and our focus shifts constantly. Broadening our perspectives will not automatically decrease our anxieties, but it may allow us to begin to deal with them.

Second, having learned something about the mass society, recognize that technology does not introduce a new problem nearly so much as it aggravates a very old one. The basic problem is one of human interaction, human communication. We worry about the child's interaction with television. I would prefer we concentrated on the effects of television on other

forms of human interaction - a minor but important shift in emphasis. To go back to Daniel Bell, the mass society, and anxiety; he points out that while revolutions in communication have brought us together in new ways, the same revolutions estrange us from each other. Relations between individuals in a mass society become tangential and compartmentalized. Primary group ties of family and community are no longer supportive; the individual loses a coherent sense of self, and that is when anxieties increase. Bell worries that 'man alone' is particularly susceptible to the charismatic leader, the secular messiah.[14] So do I.

What do we teach in response? We teach fundamentals. If your main focus is human interaction, rather than the child in front of the tube, you will recognize that the fundamentals you have learned about all communication and human interaction not only have application in a mass culture, they are crucial if the individual is to maintain his identity and his equilibrium in spite of the mass.

The president (or prime minister) is flying across the country when an unexpected political situation develops. The plane lands and the TV newsmen crowd forward with their impertinent questions. The president stands four-square and shoots back answers like an oracle. Millions watching the evening news sit transfixed by their leader's ability to grasp the facts, organize his thoughts and react instantaneously - a tremendously impressive impromptu performance. But you know that technology allowed the president to learn of the development while airborne, that reporters, and often their specific questions, were anticipated by the president and his advisors, including speech writers, that answers were framed, and that the nature of the communication situation upon landing allowed the president, by a nod, to favor reporters unlikely to be antagonistic. You know. The audience needs to know. They need to know

about types of speeches, the standard forms, so they can understand emerging forms - the fully prepared impromptu, or the pseudo-speech, published, though never delivered.

They need to know the role of the political speech writer. They need, as members of a mass audience, to be introduced to the concept of the mass communicator, "that stable of anonymity," Eric Severied called it, that puts together those bland pronoumcements, adaptable to everyone, with substance for no one. They need to understand audience adaptation, perhaps to resist it.

They need to understand much more. Do you teach drama? Part of growing up is learning the difference between fantasy and reality, through exercising the imagination.

"Nothing has reality to the human being unless he realizes it completely - lives it in the imagination - acts it."

Richard Courtney said that in his book, Play, Drama, and Thought. TV deadens the imagination. But says Courtney:

> dramatic education...recognizes the dramatic imagination as the essential human quality. Thus it encourages the child to express himself within the frameworks of creative movement, spontaneous speech and language, and impersonation and identification; in this way he can both learn and grow up - he can relate himself to his environment and see the relationship between ideas. The child comes to develop the human abilities to think and explore, to test hypotheses and discover 'truth'.[15]

Story telling and dramatic activities should probably start in the very early grades, but there is enough to do in the middle grades.

If you teach group discussion, I assume you teach applications of the process: neighborhood improvement committees, consumer interest

groups, local government citizen's-input committees. If you don't, you should; just as those of you who teach debate must teach the reasoning process, the difference between argument and assertion, the nature of supports, evidence and appeals, with practical applications in mind.

Our high school debate topic next year is "What Should Be the Future Direction of the Foreign Policy of the United States." A fine question. Certainly a debatable one. But, as a former co-coordinator of a state-wide high school forensic league, and a veteran of state finals' tournaments, I have misgivings, not about what we teach, but why we teach it - the contest atmosphere. When you teach debate, or public speaking, do you visualize your students someday before a local hearing of a government regulatory agency, arguing forcefully for environmental considerations in the planning of a new road? or do you see them receiving a trophy at a national tournament?

McLuhan says the medium is the message. That becomes true when there is only one medium and no other kinds of interaction. But, though the nature of the mass culture tends to obscure opportunities for those other kinds of interactions, they not only exist, they abound. The educator cannot simply teach skills. We must teach context and responsibility. The mass culture becomes the compartmentalized lonely, anxiety-ridden society we fear, when people don't have the skills for various types of human communication experiences, or are given the skills, and don't understand how to apply them.

Let me begin to close with a few notes of caution. You will soon have in Australia a Broadcasting Information Office. We have the Television Information Office. Understand what that is. It is a public relations firm for the television industry. They will offer a variety of materials to help you especially to utilize TV in the classroom. They will also

acknowledge some of the questions raised about television because they want to allay your fears.[16] Some of the materials will be helpful. Take everything you can get. Use it judiciously.

Also use research judiciously. Read every study you can find; but keep your perspectives broad and separate the significant from the insignificant. In an article entitled "Can TV Stimulate Imaginative Play?" Jerome and Dorothy Singer of the Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center report: "This study suggests that children in the three-to-four-year-old age group are most susceptible to the influence of an adult who can engage them directly and provide them with immediate feedback for their own responses."[17] My kindergarten teacher knew that intuitively 41 years ago. I do not mean to denigrate the research. I'm glad the intuition of my kindergarten teacher has been born out, but recognize, just as you must have confidence in the skills you teach, you should have confidence in your intuitions as well, until someone proves them wrong.

Finally, I told you not to waste your energies on regulation. There is one area of regulation, however, worthy of your attention. Work for regulations that allow educators to tape and use as examples in the classroom any television program they wish. I am incensed that the television industry would attempt to deny us the examples we need to do our job. But then I am not a stockholder in the television industry.

The television industry is upset by the proliferation of relatively inexpensive recording units. A few years ago, the CBS network brought suit against Vanderbilt University for taping and storing network evening news programs. At the time, I engaged in a running correspondence with Richard Salant, then vice-president in charge of CBS News, questioning that position. CBS eventually withdrew that suit. I don't mean to

imply personal responsibility for the change in the CBS position, but I think that the combined weight of academic outrage gave CBS pause for thought.

I hope I've given you a little to think about. Some may say too much. If I could make only one statement it would be: if you recognize the nature of the mass society, including the pressures and limitations that society imposes, but have confidence in your training in fundamentals and are willing to practice your craft realistically, in response to the society as it exists, you can modify the dehumanizing aspects of the mass culture, retard and perhaps reverse the trend toward less human interaction.

Hitler in Mein Kampf said: "I know that men are won over less by the written than by the spoken word." Explaining propaganda he told us, "all advertising whether in the field of business or politics achieves success through the continuity and sustained uniformity of its application."[18] Jerry Della Femina on advertising says "the key is to find out which button you can press on every person that makes him want to buy your product over another product. What's the emotional thing that affects people?"[19] That's language the speech teacher understands. More importantly, it's language we can respond to.

END NOTES

[1]Columbia Broadcasting System, Special Report, "Television and Politics" broadcast October, 1970.

[2]Nora Sayre, "A 1957 Film Speaks of Watergate," The New York Times (September 8, 1974). Arts and Leisure section, p. 1.

[3]"Television for Campaigns: Politicians' Friend or Foe?" U.S. News & World Report (June 23, 1950) p. 14.

[4]Arthur Koestler, "Man - One of Evolution's Mistakes?" The New York Times (October 19, 1969 Magazine section, p. 28.) The article was adapted from a paper read in September, 1969, at the 14th Nobel Symposium in Stockholm.

[5]Kevin Tindall, "Television and Research," papers from the Television & Children Conference 1978, Sydney, Sydney Teachers College, p. 48.

[6]This approach has been suggested recently by a number of American writers including Jerry Mander, Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television (New York: Wm. Morrow, 1978).

[7]Probably the most important study of the companionship function of radio was one accomplished by Harold Mendelsohn in 1961. For a comprehensive report of this study see Lewis A. Dexter & David Manning White (eds.), People, Society, and Mass Communications (New York: The Free Press, 1964) Part IV, p. 239.

Attempts to buy off television viewers have failed in England, Germany and the U.S. to my knowledge, and the title of Marie Winn's book, The Plug-in Drug (New York: Viking, 1977) capitalizes on these failures.

[8]Television and Children Conference 1978, Sydney.

[9]Kevin Tindall, p. 59.

[10]"Commercial Television and Children's Programs" Television and Children Conference 1978, Sydney, p. 21.

[11]"Changing Public Attitudes Toward Television and Other Mass Media, 1959-1976," A Report by the Roper Organization Inc., May 1977. (A more recent report for 1959 to 1978 usually published in May of the year following, should be available now.)

[12]Seventeen percent of those surveyed, Spring of 1978, answered positively. This is an all-time high.

[13]Senator John Button, "Governments and Television," Television and Children Conference 1978, Sydney, p. 5.

[14]Daniel Bell, "Theory of Mass Society," Commentary (July, 1956) p. 75-83.

[15]Richard Courtney, Play, Drama, and Thought, the Intellectual Background to Drama in Education (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1974, 3rd revised and enlarged) p. 273.

END NOTES

[16]A Television Program, "Children, Television, and Change," produced by the (American) Television Information Office and currently being shown on American television stations as a 'public service' w[illegible]e available at the Conference.

[17]Singer and Singer, "Can TV Stimulate Imaginative Play?" Journal of Communications (March 1974) p. 74.

To give credit where credit is due, the Singers, through their center, are accomplishing a great deal of research, some of which, certainly, may prove very significant. They are, also, experimenting with a program to train teachers to instruct elementary school children to view television critically.

[18]The edition quoted is Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf, translated by Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943). The first quotation is from the preface, the second, p. 185.

[19]Jerry Della Femina, From Those Wonderful Folks Who Gave You Pearl Harbor (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970) p. 147.